

Phonetic Symbols



by James Tweedie, 24 August 2013

Introduction

The [International Phonetic Alphabet](#) is a universal system of writing phonemes, the sounds used to make words in human language. It was developed from 1886 by an organisation that became known as the [International Phonetic Association](#), originally as a spelling reform for English, a language with unstandardised and extremely eclectic spelling. It is based on the Latin and Greek alphabets, with a series of punctuation and diacritic marks to indicate the length, intonation and other features, which probably makes it of limited usefulness to people who are not familiar with these alphabets. However, importantly for African languages, the International Phonetic Alphabet contains symbols for writing the bilabial, dental, alveolar and lateral clicks.

The International Phonetic Alphabet forms the basis of phonetic alphabets for specific languages, which can be found in print and [online](#) dictionaries and language learning books.

The phonetic alphabet tells the reader how to pronounce a word. This is rarely necessary for a native or first-language speaker of a language, except when an obscure word is being referenced. Native speakers learn how to pronounce their mother tongue organically, before they learn to read (or without learning to read at all).

Therefore, the main use of phonetic alphabets is in helping second-language

students. This may be very important to the survival of a language: if non-native speakers cannot learn a language, native speakers will have to learn another language (generally a regional or international *lingua franca*, or common language) to communicate with others. There is an enormous quantity and variety of resources for learning English. Can the same be said of African languages such as isiXhosa and isiZulu?

Phonetic symbols are useful in languages where one letter or cluster of letters represents more than one sound, or where the same sound can be represented by two or more letters or clusters of letters. English is a good example of a language with such eclectic spelling, whereas Spanish, which is regulated by the *Real Academia Española*, an official state institution, has a very rational system of spelling.

The following links are to lists of phonetic sounds, with International Phonetic Alphabet equivalents, in isiXhosa and isiZulu. Unfortunately they lack examples of words containing these sounds:

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/xhosa.htm>

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/zulu.htm>

Many dictionaries, especially dictionaries of English, use a set of symbols to represent phonemes, that is, sounds that we use in language. Phonetic symbols are not the same as the alphabet, although letters of the Latin and Greek alphabets as well as punctuation marks are used to form them.

Phonetic symbols are necessary because in some languages one letter or cluster of letters can represent more than one sound, or the same sound can be represented by two or more letters or clusters of letters.

The image attached is a chart of the English phonetic alphabet, divided into monophthongs (single vowel sounds), diphthongs (combinations of vowel sounds) and consonants. Note that some consonant sounds (like those spelt sh, ch and ng) are represented by more than one letter in English. Other alphabets have a single letter for these sounds.

The Problem with English

The English language is particularly difficult in terms of spelling, for several historical reasons:

Firstly, English is unusual in being equally part of two language families: the Germanic languages via Old English (a very different language to modern English, which originated in what is now Holland, Belgium and western Germany) and the Romance languages (descended from Latin) via medieval French. Consequently, there are many words in English of different origins which sound the same, but have different spellings and meanings. These are known as false cognates or 'false friends'.

Secondly, English has evolved greatly over the centuries. The lexis (vocabulary), the meanings of words and grammatical tenses and pronunciation have all changed radically, and spelling has not quite kept up.

Thirdly, English spelling and pronunciation has never really been standardised. The first proper dictionary of English was compiled and published by Dr Samuel Johnson in 1755. The famous Oxford English Dictionary (published by the Oxford University press, a department of Oxford University) is not THE official dictionary of English, it is just the biggest, and perhaps the most respected. American English has differences in spelling, vocabulary and grammar from British English, as does South African English. By contrast, Spanish (or Castilian Spanish, the main official language of Spain) is regulated by the *Real Academia Española*, an official institution of the Spanish crown. There is no need for phonetic symbols in Spanish, as Spanish spelling is entirely rational – a written word can only be read one way according to the rules of pronunciation, and vice versa.

Fourthly, English has evolved by borrowing liberally from other languages, without bothering to change the spellings of words. If English lacks a word for something (like bikini, bungalow, ski or Zeitgeist) then the handiest foreign word is poached and incorporated into the language. The whole of ancient Greek, Latin, French and German are considered fair game for appropriation by English.

Examples from English

The **-ed** ending to verbs, used to make the past tense, can have three pronunciations. For words ending in a vowel sound or most 'voiced' consonants (b, g, l, m, n, ng, r, v, z and th as in the), the sound is a **/d/**, not a full syllable. For words ending in most 'unvoiced' or 'breathed' consonants (ch, f, k, p, s, sh, x and th as in thing), the sound is a **/t/**. For words ending in d or t, the sound is the full syllable **/ɪd/**.

The words **peace** and **piece** are pronounced the same, despite their different spellings. Two or more words like this are called homophones – they sound the same. The **ea** in peace and the **ie** in piece both represent the phonetic sound **/i:/**.

However, the **ea** in **great** represents the sound /eɪ/, while the **ea** in **bread** represents the sound /e/.

The words **bow** (/baʊ/, meaning to incline your body forward as a mark of respect) and **bow** (/bəʊ/, as in bow and arrow) have the same spelling but different pronunciations. Two or more words like this are called homographs – they are spelt the same.

In each of the seven following words the **ough** cluster has a different pronunciation: **through** /u:/, **bought** /ɔ:/, **plough** /aʊ/, **although** /əʊ/, **borough** /ə/, **rough** /ʌf/ and **cough** /ɒf/.

See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_phonetic_alphabet
and: <http://wordreference.com/>

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929 words